CHECKLIST ENVIRONMENTAL ASSESSMENT

Project Name:	Triangle Communications Denton Fiber Optic Upgrade Easement Amendments
Proposed Implementation Date:	Summer 2021
Proponent:	Triangle Telephone Cooperative Association, Inc.
Location:	Easement #13708 – Section 16, Township 18 North, Range 13 East (Common Schools Trust) – Fergus County Easement #13712 – Section 10, Township 19 North, Range 14 East (Common Schools Trust) – Fergus County Easement #13707 – Section 36, Township 18 North, Range 14 East (Common Schools Trust) – Fergus County Easement #13706 – Section 36, Township 19 North, Range 13 East (Common Schools Trust) – Fergus County Easement #13709 – Section 17, Township 18 North, Range 13 East (Common Schools Trust) – Fergus County Easement #13710 – Section 3, Township 19 North, Range 14 East (Common Schools Trust) – Fergus County
County:	Fergus County

I. TYPE AND PURPOSE OF ACTION

The Proponent, Triangle Telephone Cooperative Association Inc., is applying to amend their existing 20' wide easements on multiple parcels of State Trust Land in Fergus County for the installation of underground telecommunication lines as legally described as follows:

Section 16, Township 18 North, Range 13 East: Easement #13708 encompassing 2.454 acres – W2W2
Section 10, Township 19 North, Range 14 East: Easement #13712 encompassing 0.10 acres – NW4NW4
Section 36, Township 18 North, Range 14 East: Easement #13707 encompassing 4.658 acres – NW4SW4, S2S2, NE4SE4
Section 36, Township 19 North, Range 13 East: Easement #13706 encompassing 0.563 acres – NW4NW4
Section 17, Township 18 North, Range 13 East: Easement #13709 encompassing 2.454 acres – NE4NE4, N2NW4, SW4NW4
Section 3, Township 19 North, Range 14 East: Easement #13710 encompassing 1.138 acres – SW4SW4

The easement amendments are part of a larger project where Triangle Communications is upgrading their telecommunications lines serving the Denton, MT rural area. The project consists of replacing outdated existing copper services with fiber optic lines to provide Fiber to the Home (FTTH) service in remote areas. The copper service lines will be abandoned in place with new fiber optics beings installed. The easements will be amended to reflect the additional lines in the easement corridor.

II. PROJECT DEVELOPMENT

1. PUBLIC INVOLVEMENT, AGENCIES, GROUPS OR INDIVIDUALS CONTACTED:

Provide a brief chronology of the scoping and ongoing involvement for this project.

No formal public scoping was performed by DNRC for this proposed project. Triangle Communications obtained a Settlement of Damages form from all the grazing lessees.

2. OTHER GOVERNMENTAL AGENCIES WITH JURISDICTION, LIST OF PERMITS NEEDED:

No other government permits are needed.

3. ALTERNATIVES CONSIDERED:

Proposed Alternative: Issue the 20' wide easement amendments to Triangle Communications for the underground installation of fiber optic cable across the State Trust Land sections in Fergus County.

No Action Alternative: Deny the issuance a 20' wide easement amendments to Triangle Communications for the underground installation of fiber optic cable across the State Trust Land sections in Fergus County.

III. IMPACTS ON THE PHYSICAL ENVIRONMENT

- *RESOURCES potentially impacted are listed on the form, followed by common issues that would be considered.*
- *Explain POTENTIAL IMPACTS AND MITIGATIONS following each resource heading.*
- *Enter "NONE" If no impacts are identified or the resource is not present.*

4. GEOLOGY AND SOIL QUALITY, STABILITY AND MOISTURE:

Consider the presence of fragile, compactable or unstable soils. Identify unusual geologic features. Specify any special reclamation considerations. Identify any cumulative impacts to soils.

The route proposed in the amended easements is generally located parallel to county and public roads. The land area is categorically considered great plains mixed grass prairies interspersed with cultivated cropland and according to the NRCS Soil Survey, the area consists of mainly clay loam, loams, and silty clay loam soil types across the general project area. The fiber optic cable will be installed using the direct plow method that entails opening the ground with a plow blade pulled behind a tracked cable plow. This method creates a narrow opening in the soil, inserts the cable, covers cable and smooths the disturbed soil in a single pass. This installation method is considered trenchless. Based on the proposed action and relatively short disturbance time for cable installation, no significant adverse impacts to geology and soils are expected by implementing the proposed action.

5. WATER QUALITY, QUANTITY AND DISTRIBUTION:

Identify important surface or groundwater resources. Consider the potential for violation of ambient water quality standards, drinking water maximum contaminant levels, or degradation of water quality. Identify cumulative effects to water resources.

Much of the work will occur outside drainage systems. However, the proposed easements will cross a few drainage streams where culverts are installed along the county roads. The proponent will be using a horizontal drill method to go below any drainage and no disturbance will occur inside the drainage or streambed. No significant adverse impacts to water quality, quantity or distribution are anticipated by implementing the proposed action.

6. AIR QUALITY:

What pollutants or particulate would be produced? Identify air quality regulations or zones (e.g. Class I air shed) the project would influence. Identify cumulative effects to air quality.

There may be short-term isolated impacts from the equipment exhaust that is used to install the fiber optic cable. No significant adverse impacts to air quality are expected by implementing the proposed action.

7. VEGETATION COVER, QUANTITY AND QUALITY:

What changes would the action cause to vegetative communities? Consider rare plants or cover types that would be affected. Identify cumulative effects to vegetation.

The fiber optic cable is proposed to be installed using direct plow method that entails opening the ground with a plow blade pulled behind a tracked cable plow. This method creates a narrow opening in the soil, inserts the

cable, covers that cable and smooths the disturbed soil in a single pass. This installation method is considered trenchless. The area disturbed by the trenching activity and from vehicle travel could have short term impacts on vegetation. The proponent has secured lessee settlement forms from all lessees on all sections in case of impact to cropland or grazing land. No significant long-term adverse impacts to vegetative cover, quantity or quality are expected as a result of implementing the proposed alternative.

8. TERRESTRIAL, AVIAN AND AQUATIC LIFE AND HABITATS:
Consider substantial habitat values and use of the area by wildlife, birds or fish. Identify cumulative effects to fish and wildlife.

A variety of big game (antelope, deer, elk and mountain lions), small mammals, raptors, songbirds and turkeys traverse the subject sections. The proposed project activities could temporarily disrupt wildlife movement and patterns. Due to the relatively short project duration and nature no significant adverse impacts to terrestrial, avian and aquatic life and habitats are expected to occur as a result of implementing the proposed alternative.

9. UNIQUE, ENDANGERED, FRAGILE OR LIMITED ENVIRONMENTAL RESOURCES:
Consider any federally listed threatened or endangered species or habitat identified in the project area. Determine effects to wetlands. Consider Sensitive Species or Species of special concern. Identify cumulative effects to these species and their habitat.

A search of the Montana Natural Heritage Program database indicated the following species of concern have been observed in the proposed sections:

- Grizzly Bear

The Grizzly Bear's habitat is in the general area of the easement corridors, but generally they do not congregate in the corridors due to being adjacent to county-maintained roads.

None of the tracts listed are within Greater-Sage Grouse General habitat but, the proponent has completed a consultation with MSGOT that is attached for viewing with this document.

Due to the short duration of the project, and minimal impact in the environment, it is not expected to have any significant long-term effect on any of the species identified on or around this parcel. The surface disturbance will be minimal in areas outside the adjacent to the county roads.

10. HISTORICAL AND ARCHAEOLOGICAL SITES:
Identify and determine effects to historical, archaeological or paleontological resources.

No cultural and paleontological resources have been documented nor identified in the project corridor segments. A "Small Scale and Negative Inventory/Monitoring Report" was filed by the DNRC archeologist and no inventories were found in the project area. The proposed project will have *No Effect* to *Antiquities* as defined under the Montana State Antiquities Act. Formal reports of findings are available through the DNRC and the Montana State Historic Preservation Officer. No additional archaeological or paleontological investigative work is recommended.

11. AESTHETICS:
Determine if the project is located on a prominent topographic feature or may be visible from populated or scenic areas. What level of noise, light or visual change would be produced? Identify cumulative effects to aesthetics.

The proposed action would result in the installation of underground fiber optic cable adjacent and parallel to established county roads. Once the easement areas are rehabbed from the installation disturbance, the only indication that there is an underground fiber optic line would be from any above-ground warning markers. No significant adverse impact to aesthetics is expected as a result of implementing the proposed alternative.

12. DEMANDS ON ENVIRONMENTAL RESOURCES OF LAND, WATER, AIR OR ENERGY:
Determine the amount of limited resources the project would require. Identify other activities nearby that the project would affect. Identify cumulative effects to environmental resources.

No significant adverse impacts to environmental resources of land, water, air or energy are expected to occur as a result of implementing the proposed alternative.

13. OTHER ENVIRONMENTAL DOCUMENTS PERTINENT TO THE AREA:
List other studies, plans or projects on this tract. Determine cumulative impacts likely to occur as a result of current private, state or federal actions in the analysis area, and from future proposed state actions in the analysis area that are under MEPA review (scoped) or permitting review by any state agency.

There are no other known studies or future actions are planned for this Trust land parcel.

IV. IMPACTS ON THE HUMAN POPULATION

- *RESOURCES potentially impacted are listed on the form, followed by common issues that would be considered.*
- *Explain POTENTIAL IMPACTS AND MITIGATIONS following each resource heading.*
- *Enter "NONE" If no impacts are identified or the resource is not present.*

14. HUMAN HEALTH AND SAFETY:
Identify any health and safety risks posed by the project.

No significant adverse impacts to human health and safety would occur as a result of implementing the proposed alternative.

15. INDUSTRIAL, COMMERCIAL AND AGRICULTURE ACTIVITIES AND PRODUCTION:
Identify how the project would add to or alter these activities.

The proponent has acquired signed lessee settlement forms from all of the Ag & Grazing lessees.

No adverse impacts to industrial, commercial, and agriculture activities and production are anticipated.

16. QUANTITY AND DISTRIBUTION OF EMPLOYMENT:
Estimate the number of jobs the project would create, move or eliminate. Identify cumulative effects to the employment market.

The proposed action will have no significant impact on the quantity and distribution of employment.

17. LOCAL AND STATE TAX BASE AND TAX REVENUES:
Estimate tax revenue the project would create or eliminate. Identify cumulative effects to taxes and revenue.

The proposed action will have no adverse impact on tax revenue.

18. DEMAND FOR GOVERNMENT SERVICES:
Estimate increases in traffic and changes to traffic patterns. What changes would be needed to fire protection, police, schools, etc.? Identify cumulative effects of this and other projects on government services

The implementation of the proposed alternative will not generate any additional demands on governmental services.

19. LOCALLY ADOPTED ENVIRONMENTAL PLANS AND GOALS:
List State, County, City, USFS, BLM, Tribal, and other zoning or management plans, and identify how they would affect this project.

Implementation of the proposed alternative will not conflict with any locally adopted plans.

20. ACCESS TO AND QUALITY OF RECREATIONAL AND WILDERNESS ACTIVITIES:
Identify any wilderness or recreational areas nearby or access routes through this tract. Determine the effects of the project on recreational potential within the tract. Identify cumulative effects to recreational and wilderness activities.

The proposed project follows adjacent county roads with public access. Persons possessing a valid state land recreation use license may conduct recreational activities on the tracts. There may be small areas that have reduced, but not restricted access, due to the areas of construction. The short duration of the project will have minimal impact to recreational users. The proposed project will have no long-term effect on access to and quality of recreational and wilderness activities.

21. DENSITY AND DISTRIBUTION OF POPULATION AND HOUSING:
Estimate population changes and additional housing the project would require. Identify cumulative effects to population and housing.

No significant adverse impacts to density and distribution of population and housing would occur as a result of implementing the proposed alternative.

22. SOCIAL STRUCTURES AND MORES:
Identify potential disruption of native or traditional lifestyles or communities.

There are no native, unique or traditional lifestyles or communities in the vicinity that would be impacted by the proposed alternative.

23. CULTURAL UNIQUENESS AND DIVERSITY:
How would the action affect any unique quality of the area?

The proposed alternative will not have a significant adverse impact on cultural uniqueness or diversity.

24. OTHER APPROPRIATE SOCIAL AND ECONOMIC CIRCUMSTANCES:
Estimate the return to the trust. Include appropriate economic analysis. Identify potential future uses for the analysis area other than existing management. Identify cumulative economic and social effects likely to occur as a result of the proposed action.

The Common Schools Trust will benefit by getting the following one-time fees:

Section 16, Township 18 North, Range 13 East: Easement #13708 -- $1717.80
Section 10, Township 19 North, Range 14 East: Easement #13712 -- $100.00 (minimum fee)
Section 36, Township 18 North, Range 14 East: Easement #13707 -- $3260.60
Section 36, Township 19 North, Range 13 East: Easement #13706 -- $394.10
Section 17, Township 18 North, Range 13 East: Easement #13709 -- $1717.80
Section 3, Township 19 North, Range 14 East: Easement #13710 -- $796.60

The total the Common Schools Trust would benefit is: **$7986.90**

EA Checklist Prepared By:	**Name:**	Jocee Hedrick	**Date:**	10 May 2021
	Title:	Lewistown Unit Manager, Northeastern Land Office		

V. FINDING

25. ALTERNATIVE SELECTED:

The proposed alternative has been selected and it is recommended that the State amends the existing easements to allow Triangle Telecommunications to install a new fiberoptic line in their easement corridors for the purpose of installing underground fiber optic cable on the following Trust land parcels:

Section 16, Township 18 North, Range 13 East: Easement #13708
Section 10, Township 19 North, Range 14 East: Easement #13712
Section 36, Township 18 North, Range 14 East: Easement #13707
Section 36, Township 19 North, Range 13 East: Easement #13706
Section 17, Township 18 North, Range 13 East: Easement #13709
Section 3, Township 19 North, Range 14 East: Easement #13710

26. SIGNIFICANCE OF POTENTIAL IMPACTS:

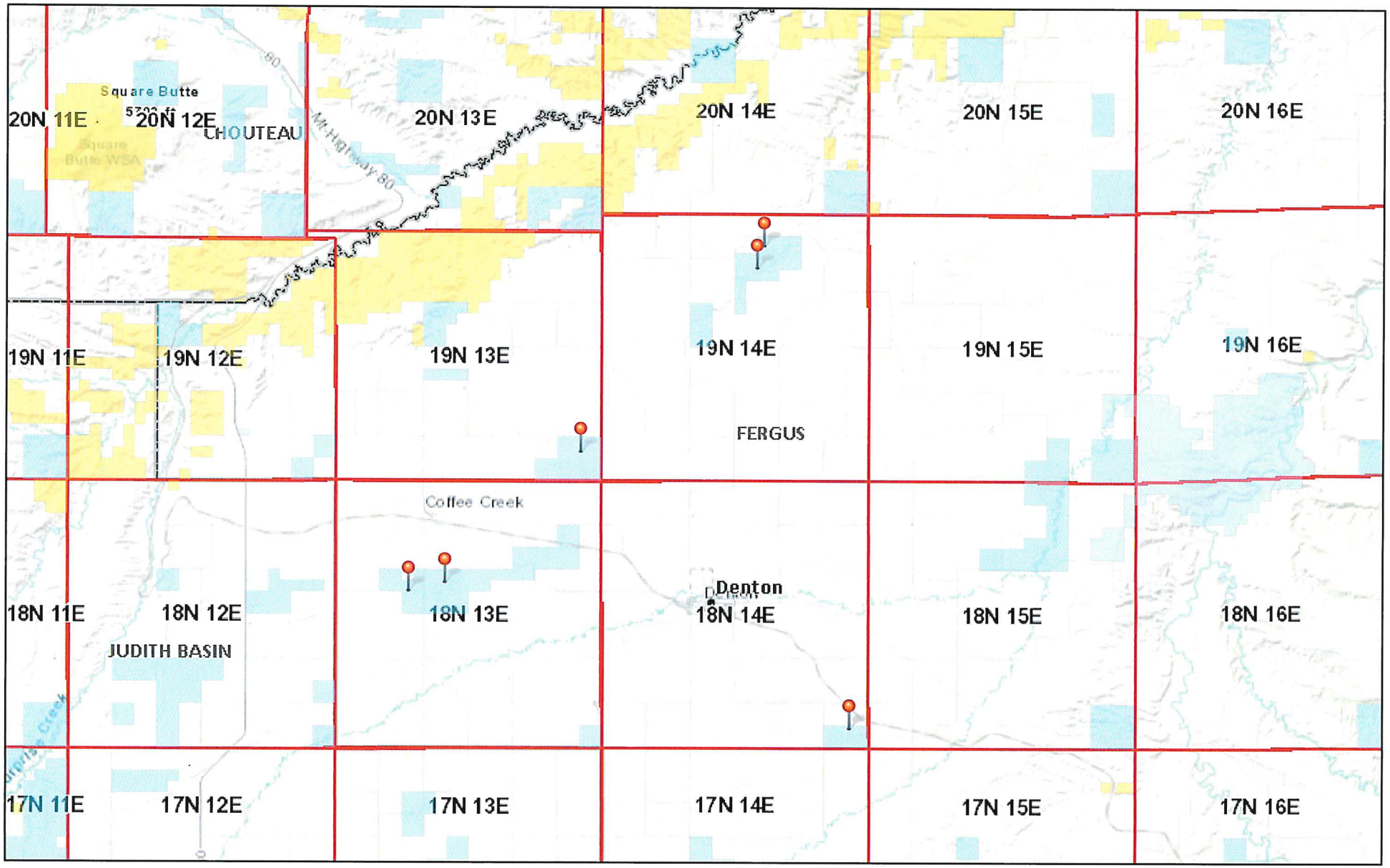
The potential for significant adverse impacts to the Trust lands listed above are minimal due to the nature of the proposed action which would entail the issuing of the easements and installation of underground fiber optic cable. The installation and disturbance are expected to be completed in a short time-frame. The easements are located adjacent to existing county roads. There are no natural features that could produce adverse impacts or species of concern occupying the parcels that are expected to be impacted by implementing the proposed action.

27. NEED FOR FURTHER ENVIRONMENTAL ANALYSIS:

☐ EIS ☐ More Detailed EA ☒ No Further Analysis

EA Checklist Approved By:	**Name:**	Clive Rooney
	Title:	Area Manager, Northeastern Land Office
Signature:		**Date:** 5-9-21

Triangle Telephone Denton Fiber Optic Upgrade Project



May 10, 2021

1:288,895

0 1.5 3 6 mi

0 2.5 5 10 km

Public Lands (MSDI)

- Bureau of Land Management
- Defense Dept/Army Corp of Engineers
- State of Montana Misc.
- State of Montana Misc.
- State of Montana Misc.
- State of Montana Misc.
- Montana State Trust Lands
- Local Government
- Local Government
- Local Government

Montana State Library, Sources: Esri, HERE, Garmin, Intermap, increment P Corp., GEBCO, USGS, FAO, NPS, NRCAN, GeoBase, IGN, Kadaster NL,

Map Author